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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ULAANBAATAR 000282

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SUBJECT: NGO Reports 1/3 of Mongolia's Urban Households Lack Access to Sufficient Food

REF: A) ULAANBAATAR 0115, B) ULAANBAATAR 0177, C) ULAANBAATAR 0205

11. SUMMARY: A recent Mercy Corps study has found that one third of Mongolia's urban households are "food insecure," meaning they do not have access to enough sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs. Poverty and unemployment are key contributing factors. Residents of provincial urban areas are less food-secure than their rural counterparts. Food secure households are more likely to use a protected water source, give loans and own more land. Mongolia is import-dependent (mostly from Russia and China) for such staples as flour, vegetables, processed foods and dairy products. Domestically produced dairy, meat and vegetable supplies are heavily affected by season, with availability highest from late summer to early winter, and lowest during the spring. Mongolia's low level of dietary diversity is similar to that of Mali, and much lower than in Vietnam or Bangladesh. Areas for possible improvement cited by Mercy Corps include engagement with local food markets and promoting food security in low income, urban households. END SUMMARY.

12. A recent study by the NGO Mercy Corps has found clear evidence of food insecurity among residents of Mongolia's provincial cities. Overall, one third of surveyed households are food-insecure; one quarter of all those surveyed were found to be moderately or severely food-insecure). Poverty and unemployment are the largest contributing factors, with low job security and single-mother families also playing a role. Those who have the least secure access to healthy food usually come from large households, live in ger districts, and rely heavily on income from government transfers to meet household needs. Other mitigating factors include education, livestock ownership, and larger income transfers.

(Reftels provide recent background on agricultural plans, small-scale food protests, and the impact of inflation on food prices.)

FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS AT GREATEST RISK

13. Households categorized as food-insecure are also more likely to be female-headed; to have taken out a loan in the past year; to have reported a recent illness in the household with an inability to afford medical care; to be dependent on income transfers as a large portion of household income; and, unsurprisingly, to have malnourished children. Food-secure households were more likely to use a protected water source, give loans, have a larger proportion of income coming from employment, and own more land.

IN PROVINCIAL CITIES, LESS ACCESS TO SUFFICIENT FOOD

14. Citing the strong linkages between food security and the long-term success of economic development initiatives, Mercy Corps' study was intended to frame the issue in the Mongolian context. In most developing countries, food insecurity is usually found in rural, subsistence agricultural areas. But in the case of Mongolia, residents of provincial urban areas were found to have the least access to "sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." Their rural compatriots could rely on a large supply of herder livestock (nearly 40 million livestock were recorded in Mongolia

ULAANBAATA 00000282 002 OF 002

last year). However, rural households were more vulnerable to natural disasters (including drought and harsh winters) than their countrymen in provincial cities. . 60% of Mongolia's population now resides in urban centers, and the percentage is growing.

MORE MEAT, LESS FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

15. Market surveys reveal that meat products were the most available, while fish, fruits and vegetables were scarcer. Of the five main food sectors -- meat, dairy, fruit and vegetables, flour/cereals and other processed foods -- most businesses concentrated on meat sales, due to a large supply of livestock. Primary sources of flour, vegetables, processed foods (e.g. salt, sugar) and dairy (during the winter) were either directly imported from Russia and China or brought in from Ulaanbaatar. All rice is imported from abroad. Mongolia's food processing industry is underdeveloped, and relatively little food production was found by the NGO's survey.

CHEESEBURGER IN PARADISE? DEPENDS ON THE SEASON

16. The dairy, meat and fruit/vegetable sector are heavily affected by seasonal changes; availability is highest from late summer to early winter, and lowest during the spring, when both food and employment are scarce. The main causes of the fluctuations in supply are due to highly seasonal production patterns, limited food-storage (refrigeration) facilities, and poor transport infrastructure. Collectively, this leaves Mongolian households facing a major period of food insecurity from March through May) each year. A similar but less severe period begins in August and peaks in October/November.

POOR DIETARY DIVERSITY

17. On average, households in the survey had eaten from about seven of the 12 food groups during the previous 24 hours, most commonly cereals, meat, miscellaneous (including tea and condiments) and oils/fats. The least commonly reported food groups were eggs, beans and fish. Eleven percent of the survey population had eaten from less than five food groups, indicating poor dietary diversity. According to the report, Mongolia's level of dietary diversity is similar to that found in Mali and much lower than in Vietnam or

Bangladesh.

A WAY FORWARD

18. Areas for possible improvement cited by Mercy Corps include engagement with local food markets and promoting food security in low income, urban households. The report recommends initiatives for vocational training, job creation, infrastructure development, and local food production for local consumption.

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